



radical democracy

interview/
Sofia Campos
wildfire project
united we dream
freedom side network
IDEAS@UCLA

David Olson interviews Sofia Campos for Radical Democracy

Sofia became involved in the immigrant youth movement after discovering she was undocumented in 2007. She served as Board Chair for United We Dream, the largest youth-led immigrant organization in the United States, and as co-chair for Improving Dreams, Equality, Access and Success [IDEAS], at UCLA, where she organized for the federal and California DREAM Acts, and the Right to Dream campaign. Sophia is a Core Trainer for the Wildfire Project, a movement-building organization which trains and connects grassroots activist groups.

This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

Radical Democracy: You've been active in the immigrant youth movement for almost ten years, successfully organizing around the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals [DACA] policy, for example. What have you been working on recently?

Sofia Campos: In 2014, Nelini Stamp gave me a call and asked if I wanted to join the Wildfire Project along with a few others she had met through Occupy

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Wall Street. It was an opportunity to train grassroots organizations like the ones we had been working with through Freedom Side Network, like the Ohio Students Association. It was really exciting to work with these powerful youths and to develop my craft as a trainer, practitioner and organizer, and to put my learning and reflections into a curriculum that's distributed, taught, shared and grown alongside other people with similar values.

That's really what the Wildfire Project is for me: a political home to develop our training skills, and see more people develop their skills, so we can expand the skills and the knowledge in our movement.

Since I've joined The Wildfire Project we've trained the Dream Defenders, and still work with them. Before that we trained Ohio Students Association, and Get Equal. I helped train Rise — youths from 8 to 21 years old, really young — in environmental organizing. Now we're planning trainings for Defenders of the Land in Canada. We're working specifically with the Women's Council, an indigenous group of women in Canada.

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RD: One of the working definitions we use for “radical” change is that it involves transforming institutions and systems — economic, education, political, social — not just changing policy or officials. Do you feel that same shift in emphasis happening in immigration organizing?

SC: Yes. Through my experience with immigrant youth organizing, I see that a lot of us have come to learn — through both a very personal process and a very public process — that this immigration system is fixed. It's not broken, so it won't work to “reform” it, as the language has been around the issue.

The system is very much fixed against us. A lot of companies and people benefit off of filling up these detention centers with our people in those beds — just the same as in our prisons and jails. So, yes, I think there is a greater understanding of the systemic change we're fighting for, and that needs to be at the core of the strategy of our organizing.

But I come from immigration circles where my people are being deported every day, so there is also an understanding that people need immediate relief.

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We live a life of instability, of uncertainty. Knowing that my mother can be taken away from me, whenever — that speaks to an urgent need for relief, each and every single day.

So yes, understanding that systemic change needs to happen and at the same time understanding that we need local policies, we need laws right now that will provide us with the capacity to continue to organize and continue to grow our movement.

RD: The immigration rights movement has had some real victories the past few years, even if there has not been serious institutional or systemic change...

SC: The fact that immigration has been revamped in the last few years is largely due to everyone, from immigrant youth to day laborers and parents, coming out as undocumented and unafraid. And then winning DACA was a huge relief. It provided relief and grew our number of victories, but it's also led to some folks to think, "that's enough." So we

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definitely need support in making sure that that's not the narrative. I think the fact that we won DACA showed a lot of people that organizing *does* work. That's very important, especially coming from cultures and families that have run away from governments that persecute them for protesting, for organizing. There's been a lot of fear in our communities that live on the margins, and our communities have been forced to become submissive and put our heads down.

So I consistently hold both of those goals at the same time: Systemic change, I'm going to make explicitly and clearly at the forefront of my politics and my work. But I come home every day to my mom and my dad who have sacrificed everything for me and my sister and brother, who made me who I am today. So I also need to fight for them to make sure that they are able to continue to live here with me. I want the right to be with my family, in safety. For a lot of us, it's holding both the idea of long-term change and needing relief in our communities right now.

RD: That ability to work on both short term goals—which can help to grow the movement — while keeping radical change as the ultimate goal, seems key.

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SC: And communities on the margins — the undocumented, the Black, queer and trans communities — those folks really understand that. They feel that tension consistently. We're working to make that a complimentary kind of tension instead of a conflict because I think we need a balance of those two. We need to hold that in our practice and our reflections, in our study and our understanding of what our power is. That's what's going to speak to our people: getting the truth out about how we need systemic change and also getting those everyday wins, step by step. I think that's where a lot of us are right now. We've had to teach ourselves to balance long-term, systemic goals with getting short-term wins.

RD: That seems like one of the big benefits of connecting movements — the ability to coordinate and collaborate on long-term and short-term goals. Although each group might be focused on a different issue, we're actually a lot of small armies fighting the same foe, the same systems.

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SC: Definitely. I think people understand that, once it's teased out. That's why Wildfire has resonated with a lot of folks. We have a "Master's House" exercise, one of the main workshops that we do. We pull out patriarchy, white supremacy and capitalism as three systems that uphold the Master's House. And that's ultimately the system we're up against. They lean on each other to benefit themselves and work against us, to keep us in the conditions we are currently in. The way we take people through the exercise is to have them think about their lives personally, and how each of those systems have impacted them, and the rules that each of those systems make on their lives.

For example, with racism one of the rules is, "The lighter you are, the more money you will make, or the better you look." So skin color dictates all these things about your worth, basically. The darker you are, the less worth you have. Which is also connected to a rule in capitalism: that your life has a monetary value dictated by your labor. So we tease out these rules based on their personal lives and experience, because that's so important, and they're able to see how these rules, these systems

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overlap and connect, and depend on each other to survive. Participants see how much we internalize those rules without even noticing it. They see that those are not rules that they've created for themselves, and our communities have not created these rules for ourselves. That's a very different position than what they walk in with. That process is always very powerful for both facilitators and participants. They walk out with an understanding that yes, they are freedom fighters against particular issues, but also that they're fighting an entire system.

RD: Realizing that they're part of a bigger struggle...

SC: I think that's been a huge takeaway. To be able to articulate that clearly, and have shared language, shared vision around that, has been very significant for folks. I think we need to keep growing and nurturing that. And figure out, as we continue our path against a particular system, how to consistently back each other up, and develop narratives that encompass all of this in a concise and effective way.

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As I'm fighting around immigration, I need to make sure that I'm also tackling racism within my community, and pointing to the capitalism that is part of keeping my community undocumented and without rights.

RD: How important is it for folks to be aware of the past of the Immigration Rights Movement, and the history of other social movements as well?

SC: Extremely important. I was born in Peru but I came here when I was six years old, so I grew up in this educational system. Part of what we try to address at Wildfire is the lack of education we receive — and reclaiming our education, reclaiming our history, really. We're not taught about the real immigration history in this country. Often we're not taught about the real slavery that happened here, the fights, the Civil Rights Movement.

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Not just Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks, but Miss Ella Baker, Malcom X, Marcus Garvey. All of these freedom fighters and leaders are part of the history of this country.

RD: What would you say to people who are sitting on the sidelines of movement work, but listening intently, and thinking about joining in?

SC: The first person that comes to my mind when you ask that question is my mom. I consider her a great organizer and activist, but she can't be out there in actions all the time. She's has a fulltime job in daycare, and she has so many responsibilities. But she is a powerhouse, and she has empowered herself by seeing what we've done. She can see her daughter, her kid, become politicized in this country and become an organizer, and see the fruits of that labor in DACA. She sees my own strength, my own voice. And she's talked consistently about how much that's impacted her. She's come out in interviews and proclaimed her undocumented-ness openly and publicly. And that's been amazing and empowering.

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My mom cooks food before some of the events, or she'll show up at a talk we're having and becomes this sort of mother figure for everyone there. A lot of us just love when there's a parent there to provide that nurturing love we often yearn for. It's just so much different when it's from a mom. My peers' eyes light up when she talks and laughs, and just from her being there. I feel proud to be able to share my mom with others.

So when I think of people being on the "sidelines," I think everybody has a role, if we're creating the right kind of movement. A movement where every single person, every single child has an important role. Whether it's by donating some money, or by showing up at an event and just being there, whether it's by helping your daughter or friend or whoever you're being an ally to — all of those things play such an important role in sustaining our strength and energy to keep doing this work for life. Because that's really what we need: life-long support systems.

RD: Right...Realizing that everyone has a role, that everyone has something to contribute in the movement is vitally important. There's not just one way to be involved.

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SC: It's really a matter of finding your strengths and playing to those strengths, because all of our strength is needed right now. And yeah, always coming back to that love. Because that one smile, that hug, really just being there that can make the difference between somebody continuing to do his work, or making the decision to not take their life.

I say that because one of our peers killed himself last February, Marshawn [McCarrel] from Ohio. And we just didn't know. We didn't know that was even on the radar. And that shit happens all the time. That's the reality that we're in, and he was a blessing from the Universe. He had so many talents and skills, and he was one of our strongest. But that's how deep these issues go, that's how deep our mental battles are. And so to have each other's presence, love and support in every and any kind of way makes a world of a difference.

I mean that with so much of myself, so much of my heart, with so much seriousness. I know that's broad, but I really believe that.



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